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ABSTRACT

This factsheet presents several generalizations regarding stress, then looks specifically at faculty/counselor distress and student distress. Coping strategies to help faculty and counselors reduce their own stress and the stress of students are listed; both preventive and combative strategies are included. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Understanding and Managing Stress in the Academic World

Stress is a necessary and an unavoidable concomitant of daily living—necessary because without some stress we would be listless and apathetic creatures, and unavoidable because it relates to any external event, be it pleasurable or anxiety-producing. Severe stress has been correlated with coronary disease, respiratory problems, backaches, high blood pressure, and other psychosomatic illnesses, to the extent that for most people stress is a loaded term that connotes unhealthy or harmful conditions, i.e., a dis-ease or illness. In truth, however, stress can also motivate and invigorate and enable people to achieve far more than they thought themselves capable of doing.

Generalizations Regarding Stress

- Stress is connected with life changes, personal and/or work-related; and too many changes at one time, either positive or negative, can overload an individual's capacity to adapt successfully and result in illness of one sort or another.
- What may be distressful to one person may be excitingly challenging (positively stressful) to another.
- The same event can be distressful at one time and stimulating or non-stressful at another.
- Whether an event causes distress depends upon the individual's perception of the situation.
- How a person responds to stress depends upon the environment, the magnitude of the stressor, what has gone before, the person's self-perceived ability to handle the stressor, the person's physical condition, and just plain habit.
- Stress can be self-imposed—e.g., setting too high standards or having unrealistic expectations regarding one's abilities; or situational—e.g., time constraints, lack of resources, threats to emotional or physical well-being, challenges beyond one's ability to respond, conflicts between one's personal values and the values of others.
- Type A personalities (people who exhibit a high degree of such traits as self-control, impatience, competitiveness, tenseness, inability to relax, orientation to achievement, and denial of failure) appear to be more prone to stressful reactions than those who are able to relax without guilt, who move and talk more slowly, who are content to do one thing at a time, and who generally take themselves less seriously than their counterparts.

In general, then, most stressors are in themselves neutral and do not necessarily produce distressful reactions. Adverse physical and emotional consequences are usually the result of the way an individual perceives particular events or conditions.

Faculty/Counselor Distress

In 1983, a major national study (Gmelch, Wilke, & Lovrich) revealed the existence of a fairly diffuse problem of stress in university settings as opposed to more discipline-specific problems. Of the three functions performed by most faculty in higher education—teaching, research, and service activities—teaching was designated as the most stressful. The ten most troublesome areas for faculty, those that caused the most stress, appeared to be the following: imposing excessively high self-expectations; securing financial support for research; having insufficient time to keep abreast with current events in the field; receiving low pay for work done; striving for publication of individual research; feeling continually overloaded with work; interference of job demands with personal activities; lack of progress in the individual's career; interruptions from telephone and drop-in visitors; and meetings. The majority of these ten top stressors, it will be noted, relate directly to time and/or resource complaints.

Burnout is a distinctive kind of job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted. Research indicates that individuals engaged in the helping professions or human services are especially susceptible to burnout. Burnout is not just a temporary indisposition but an unhealthy condition that makes once idealistic, productive, enthusiastic workers detriments to their profession, their colleagues, and themselves. Strangely enough, burnout usually affects the most able individuals—those who are the most competent and committed, those who feel the most strongly about the value of what they do and want to do their best. Academic institutions are now paying increased attention to burnout because it diminishes the effective services of the very best people in a given profession.

Student Distress

Students entering college can experience a reaction similar to shock as they attempt to respond to the multiplicity of responsibilities facing them such as organizing their time, handling new social interactions, dealing with changes in their relationships with home base, and adapting to life on a huge campus with large numbers of students. Research on student stress is fairly recent, stemming from not more than a decade ago, but evidence from several studies suggests that academic performance

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is the most critical concern of students, especially first-year students, and that the problems perceived to be the most intense sources of stress are examinations and grades, financial concerns, fear of failure on specific assignments, and career decisions. Johnson's research (1978) revealed nine major categories of student stress, and his findings are supported by the results of several later studies. These categories are instruction, competition, organization of time, adjustment to college, administrative problems, social adjustment, finances, housing, and transportation. An analysis of the research involving student stress indicates that the most critical stressors have to do with the instructional process itself—grades, examinations, and studying.

Stress-Coping Strategies for Faculty and Counselors

Faculty methods of coping with stress may be classified into two major categories: primarily preventive strategies and primarily combative strategies ("Stress Counseling," 1986). *Preventive strategies* include the following:

1. **Avoiding stressors through appropriate life adjustments**—developing more nurturing relationships, finding a more suitable job, attempting to create a working environment and/or style that is more rewarding.
2. **Managing the expectations and demands made upon oneself**—keeping tasks in perspective, maintaining realistic self-expectations.
3. **Changing stress-inducing ways of behaving and responding**—recognizing unproductive behaviors, finding alternate ways of behaving.
4. **Augmenting personal coping resources**—assessing personal assets, knowing personal strengths, bringing them to bear on difficult situations.

Combative strategies include the following:

1. **Stress monitoring**—being aware of stress-related symptoms within oneself.
2. **Marshalling personal resources**—reflecting on past successes in dealing with strong stressors, focusing on the positive.
3. **Taking action to reduce the stressor**—being assertive, confronting issues, refusing inappropriate requests for additional responsibilities.
4. **Developing tolerance for unavoidable stress**—cognitively restructuring the situation, looking for potential positive outcomes.
5. **Lowering stress arousal**—trying to avoid thinking about a troublesome stressor, blocking it out of one's consciousness.

Faculty/Counselor Aids to Reducing Stress in Students

Faculty and counselors should attempt to challenge students, but not so much that they lose their motivation, spontaneity, and initiative. The following suggestions for those who work with students can help minimize sources of student stress:

1. Be explicit and extremely clear on all expectations and responsibilities for students and communicate in such a way that students feel free to question and discuss.
2. Develop a positive interactive relationship with students.
3. Adopt a distinct and defensible reward structure.
4. Allow students to have at least a modicum sense of control over their student roles.
5. Treat students as individuals rather than as a generalized whole.
6. Assist students to learn stress-coping strategies.

Summary

Faculty and counselors who are distressed will be less effective in what they do. The self-absorption that often accompanies negative stress can obstruct stimulating teaching and empathic listening. Tension and ill health can undermine job performance. Disappointment and frustration are inevitable occupational hazards in either teaching or counseling, and those who work with students should keep a realistic perspective toward the goals and limitations of what they can achieve. Most of all, faculty and counselors should not only have a thorough understanding of stress but should also demonstrate the ability to implement appropriate practices in their own lives, thus modeling positive stress management for their students and clients. Those who help students deal effectively with stress are performing a service of lasting value, as healthy stress management is one of the most important life-long learning skills that an individual may acquire.

Resource Documents

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